THE AMAZING BLIND

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Sociology

THE AMAZING BLIND

By Fraser Bond

A METROPOLITAN editor facetiously remarked the other day that on the basis of publicity the general public must cherish the notion that the war was being won exclusively by the marines, the Catholics and the blind. The reason for the inclusion of the last group in this triumvirate is that newspapers from coast to coast have quickly spotted the human interest appeal in the stories that drift in to them of sightless men and women taking a useful part in the war program. Behind these headlines lies the fact that defense plants have seized on the highly developed sense of touch which many blind people possess and have put these men and women in jobs that demand tactile efficiency, and that civilian industry, faced by an acute labor shortage, has modified a long-established prejudice and has begun to employ visually handicapped workers.

Today as a result, a hitherto almost untapped reservoir of labor finds itself suddenly being syphoned into a variety of occupations. In a New Jersey factory a blind man is employed making exceptionally small cores. Not only does he make them well; the management states unequivocally that he is the finest small core maker it has ever hired. In the salvage department of a Texas airplane plant a blind woman is considered one of their most valuable workers on the burr bench, where rough spots left on metal machine parts have to be detected and smoothed away. In the big shipyards in the State of Washington a blind man holds down a job as marine engineer; and at a large air depot in Pennsylvania another sightless chap works as a mechanic in the propeller

FRASER BOND *writes that he is a Canadian by birth and a New Yorker by choice. In 1926 he left the staff of the New York* Times *to become professor of journalism at Columbia University, where he remained until 1934. His interest in blind people and their problems dates from a few years back when cataract brought him a period of "personal dimout."*

in May, 1939, branded the document as a "breach of faith" and a "unilateral denunciation of an engagement," declared in April 1943 that his Government would not deviate from the policy of the White Paper. Judging from many indications, a new scheme for the partition of Palestine is now in the making. The Jews apparently will be offered a slice of the area already colonized by them, plus the "Negeb" — the barren south of Western Palestine. All the rest of the country, with the possible exception of the Holy Places, will be handed over to the Arabs as a contribution to a larger, British-controlled Arab Federation.

Another index to some new anti-Zionist venture of the British Colonial Office is detected by Zionists in the persistent reports of impending bloodshed in Palestine. The familiar pattern of events seems shaping up once more. A correspondent of the London *Times* foretells riots and civil conflict. The Palestine Administration is actively engaged in searches for arms in Jewish settlements, in disarming the Jewish self-defense organization, and in staging trials against Jews possessing arms. This is an exact repetition of the familiar "softening up" tactics which have preceded every outbreak of Arab violence in Palestine.

The Zionists believe that Britain is determined to scuttle the Jewish National Home and to take over the Middle East in its entirety. Whether it will succeed in this imperialist venture remains to be seen. Sometimes there is more strength in the black despair of the weak than in White Papers of the mighty. The Jews have displayed marvelous vitality through the ages. They may yet survive the unsavory intrigues of their friends, as they have always survived the blows of their enemies.

Decisions by Britain on this issue that ignore the views of other Allied nations would only encourage and underwrite unilateral decisions on other problems elsewhere. London must be made aware that Palestine is not a purely "domestic question." The United States of America endorsed the Balfour Declaration and the Mandate and therefore would share responsibility for any "breach of faith," to use Churchill's description, on England's part. Russia, too, may not welcome further imperialist expansion of the British in the Middle East. Other countries have interests in the "Grand Central" of the world. Britain does not have the only or the last word in the Palestinian situation.

division. This man, by the way, fitted himself for his job by taking the training course as a general mechanic at the Pennsylvania State School of Aeronautics, and secured the job at which he works through his own initiative.

Two blind women are working in airplane factories in Kansas City, one operating a stakon power machine and the other a riveting machine on sub-assembly. And in Los Angeles two blind men are among workers chosen to pass on the accuracy of bomb fuse parts so small that they require unusually close inspection. Officers of the Los Angeles Army Ordnance Headquarters reporting on the work of these men state that not only is their work above standard, but that they actually work faster than the sighted workers in their department.

For every blind worker who makes the headlines there are a score of others who never get into the news. Yet the jobs they are doing are quite as important, if less spectacular, than those selected for attention in the foregoing paragraphs. Even before bombs dropped on Pearl Harbor the American Foundation for the Blind, the national agency with which Helen Keller is closely connected, had listed one hundred occupations which blind people had demonstrated that they could tackle. These ranged all the way from following the plow to filling the pulpit, from real estate operation to radio entertaining, from beekeeping to college teaching. For some time a few blind men and women in different parts of the country have been acting as telephone operators at small office switchboards equipped with sound signals instead of the usual light flashes. For years blind girls have been working as dictaphone operators in agencies and organizations that had sufficient faith in their ability to employ them. Many blind men carry on successfully as professional osteopaths; and there are a few instances of men and women operating calculating machines equipped with Braille symbols.

Now, with our sighted population being more and more drained to serve in the armed forces and to take jobs in essential war industries, blind men and women are being called upon in ever-increasing numbers to fill the vacancies thus caused. Tasks that were once considered the sole province of the seeing are now being performed, and performed with great competency, by the sightless.

There are many instances of blind people working as folders in

laundries, packers in candy and food factories, and stringers in jewelry shops. One blind man repairs meters for his local water department. Another works in a bakery, emptying flour sacks. Still another tests and repairs radios. A dress manufacturing company in Texas employs two blind girls to pin up finished dresses, and in the case of two-piece garments, to make sure the sizes match. In a large nursery out west, twenty-two blind boys are doing their bit to relieve the labor shortage. Equipped with leather-faced gloves and goggles to protect hands and eyes, they strip the leaves from raspberry bushes by sliding their hands from the base of each to the top, pull the plants from the ground, and prepare them for shipment. Of these twenty-two, seventeen are reported to be doing work above the average.

A twenty-one-year-old truck driver who lost his sight last year in a quarry blast is working in the mill of a nationally known breakfast food company operating an automatic sack filler. He has had two raises since he was placed in his present job last August, and is now earning from $45.00 to $53.00 per week, depending upon the amount of his overtime. So excellent is his performance that when the industrial agent who was responsible for his placement called recently to see how the young man was getting along, the plant superintendent seized the opportunity to put in a request for an additional blind worker.

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Unfortunately for business and industry, the number of employable blind workers in the United States is relatively small. Of the estimated blind population of upwards of 200,000, only about 25 per cent, or 50,000, fall within the employable age group — that is, between the ages of nineteen and fifty years. Of that number, many are in need of vocational training and readjustment before they can be successfully placed in competition with sighted workers, and many more are rendered unemployable by reason of physical factors or handicaps in addition to that of blindness. Because of these varying factors, authorities in the field of work for the blind differ in their estimates of exactly how many sightless men and women are available for employment at the present time.

With the blind, as with all handicapped groups, there is always a percentage which, because of age or other factors, is unable to com-

pete in business and industry with seeing workers. But even these are shouldering their share of the country's burden. Agencies for the blind have for many years now been doing what they could do to provide employment for such workers in "sheltered shops" which concerned themselves chiefly with the making of brooms, the caning of chairs, and with various kinds of weaving. These shops, however, gave employment to only a limited number, since the handicrafts produced found only a limited market.

In 1938 this situation began to change with the passage of the Wagner-O'Day Act, which directed government departments to purchase certain of their commodities from workshops for the blind. The American Foundation for the Blind immediately established a non-profit allocating agency called National Industries for the Blind, to cooperate with the government purchasing agents in allocating their orders for the blind to the sheltered shops equipped to handle them. This machinery had hardly been set up when the pre-war defense program got under way. In no time, government orders began to pour in for deck swabs, pillowcases for use in training camps, khaki trousers, and other articles which the sheltered shops could supply. As a result, in fifty-four such shops in twenty-nine states, upwards of 2500 sightless men and women are now busily and profitably engaged. Of this number, 600 have joined the wage-earning group for the first time in their lives.

Before 1941 there were few employers who would even consider employing a blind workman. Now all that has changed. Faced with a labor shortage, and convinced finally that there are certain jobs which the blind can do as well, and sometimes better, than sighted workers, they are turning with greater and greater frequency to the ranks of the sightless to fill jobs in factory and workshop. The Ford Company has publicly announced that for a long time it has believed in and practiced the utilization of physically handicapped workers. Today this company employs some 1200 totally or partially blind men and states that all these handicapped workers give full value for their wages and carry out their tasks without expecting or receiving any special consideration.

There is a striking unanimity of opinion on the part of employers everywhere concerning their blind workers. All agree that they are doing a fine job, and comment on the extraordinary powers of con-

centration which they seem to possess. Freedom from visual distractions is, of course, one of the reasons for this power to concentrate. But added to this is the knowledge on the part of the blind worker that in order to make good he must concentrate, must give all his thought to the job in hand.

War has opened the door of opportunity to the sightless. Through earnest effort and proven efficiency they are now striving to make sure that Peace will not close it.

Dancing

AMERICA GOES BALLET

By Arthur Bronson

America has become ballet conscious. A comparatively recent acquisition to the entertainment world — only eleven years old, or since the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came to these shores in 1933 — ballet is now an integral part of the national scene. Two major ballet companies are on cross-country tours this season, while a half-dozen smaller troupes are similarly twirling over the landscape.

The Ballet Theatre, with a personnel of over a hundred, has been touring from New York to Los Angeles, touching at such way points as York, Pennsylvania, and Joplin, Missouri, as well as cities like Philadelphia and Chicago, to take in ninety-five towns by the end of March.

The Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, with a cast headed by Alexandra Danilova, Igor Youskevitch, Frederic Franklin and Ruthanna Boris, is also out on a full season's tour, embracing metropolis and whistle-stop from New England to the West Coast.

And following in their dance-steps are the less pretentious groups. The Spanish dancer Argentinita and her ensemble, Martha Graham and her modern dance troupe, and Katherine Dunham and her Negro *Tropical Revue*, are all touring this season. Edwin Strawbridge and his company are out on a transcontinental jaunt with a program entitled, "America Dances," a kind of history of the United States in dance form. Mia Slavenska, the lovely Yugoslav star of the film *Ballerina* and former leading dancer of the Ballet Russe, is touring the country with her own ensemble. For one Devi Dja and her Bali

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ARTHUR BRONSON *was graduated from Harvard in 1924, and for the last seven years has been assistant drama and music editor of the Philadelphia* Record.

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